ADMINISTERING MUSICAL ETHNICITY – TO WHOM, BY WHOM AND WITH WHAT CONSEQUENCES

What Makes Ethnicity Matter?

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Introduction

Ethnomusicologists obviously must deal with ethnicity. However, what we put into this concept, and how we choose to use it in our work and our writing is, surprisingly, often left undiscussed. We do have a, more or less, common understanding of a number of criteria that make up the ethnicity of a given group of people, such as a common language, religion, history and heritage, cultural, and of course, musical practices. However, more often than not, and particularly in dealing with today's minority cultures, which are located in complex urban societies, we will find that these elements do not correlate completely; the units delimited by one criterion do not coincide with the units delimited by another. It might also be noted that in much contemporary research there is a tendency to avoid placing too much emphasis on ethnicity as an explanatory factor, and instead search for other more varied and pluralistic approaches to describe and analyse the particular social, political, or cultural configurations emerging in contemporary societies. Nevertheless, whether we like it or not, ethnicity still serves as an unavoidable and often useful category in our fields of study.

As opposed to various lexical definitions, the prevailing understanding in anthropology has it that ethnicity should not be regarded as a property, a characteristic or quality of a group, but as an *emic* category of ascription. This entails that a crucial element in understanding ethnicity is how members of a community, themselves, regard their cultural belonging and cultural relations. Consequently, we may find that two social groups may very well share cultural practices, religion, language - even heritage and myths of origin - and nevertheless, the members regard themselves as belonging to separate ethnic groups and ardently defend this understanding. Conversely, we may find that groups with largely disparate cultural practices feel they belong to the same ethnic group. Cultural difference in itself is not the decisive feature of ethnicity.

Ever since Fredrik Barth's writings on ethnic groups and boundaries, the focus on ethnicity seen as a *relation* has had a major influence on anthropology and related fields of study (Barth 1969). Many years after Barth's seminal work, Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen describes ethnicity as "an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction." (Eriksen 2002:12). In other words, ethnicity has to do with social contact, with ways in which social groups construct understandings of themselves by confronting and interacting with others. The ultimate consequence of this approach would be that it is impossible - or at least improper - to investigate ethnicity without paying due attention to processes of interethnic relations and social boundaries. Since Barth, a large number of anthropological studies on ethnicity tend to emphasise the boundary-making activities. We might observe that it seems like these aspects have not been given the same kind of attention in ethnomusicology. In most works concerning the main topic of our seminar - minority musics - there is far more interest in the ways in which music creates community and binds people together than on processes by which musical practices serve as instruments of social demarcation and the conveying of cultural difference.

But, our understandings of ethnicity inevitably influence our work, whether consciously or unconsciously. A pair of concepts employed by Anders Hammarlund in his work on the Assyrian minority in Sweden in the early 1990s, relate to the tensions and dualities of understanding ethnicity in a most useful way. Hammarlund addresses aspects of community-building by suggesting that we discern between the *catalytic* and the *emblematic* functions of a musical practice (1990:95). Catalytic functions concern the internal social chemistry of the immigrant group; the stimulation of feelings of togetherness and community. Emblematic functions, on the other hand, deal with a group's outward self-representation, especially in relation to a majority culture. They concern the creation of difference; the self-definition of the community as distinct from the surrounding world, and the outward communication of this difference. These two distinct functions are often filled by different music styles. For example, Assyrians in Sweden primarily use traditional folk music when presenting

themselves to the surrounding majority society, while the internal culture of the group is dominated by more modern and flexible music styles, including various elements picked up through contact with Swedish "international" popular music culture.

It is important to underline that it may be problematic to characterise a musical performance as emblematic or catalytic based only on musical style. One must always take into consideration the ways in which the music is socially constructed within a specific context. Nevertheless, the important implication of Hammarlund's concepts is that they help us become aware of the dual aspect of ethnicity; that the musical practice of a community deals with the development of internal as well as external relations, relations between members of a social group as well as relations between the group and the surrounding world.

One topic at this seminar relates to minorities and the many new multicultural contexts that arise in a world marked by migrations of various kinds, whether these migrations are wanted or unwanted. Migration and the establishment of minority communities in every European country obviously highlight discourses of cultural ethnicity in various ways. The remainder of this paper will be dedicated to exploring some of the ways in which understandings of cultural ethnicity are challenged by varying strategies that can be found among immigrants today.

Minorities and Ethnicity

For cultural communities operating far from their country of origin, their musical practices change, along with the cultural significance of these practices. On the one hand, we can find a renewed interest in music as an ethnic marker, a unifying community practice, and a badge of cultural identity. As various studies carried out in European countries clearly demonstrate, immigrant communities built around notions of a common history and a common homeland, often tend to stimulate traditional music, or music which in other ways relates to the heritage and history of the group. On the other hand, alternative cultural strategies appear. The minority setting also exposes people to new musical ways of expression and stimulates cultural boundary-crossings of numerous kinds.

So, what makes ethnicity matter for minority groups? Under what circumstances do notions of ethnic belonging become important? The most obvious answer to this question is that ethnicity matters all the more when it is threatened. This implies that a strong wish to hold on to and reinforce anything you understand as your own arises the moment you have a feeling you are loosing it. Just like a fish that is not the least bit interested in the water as long as it is swimming around in it, it becomes intensely interested in it from the moment it is caught.

Many minorities - and especially immigrant minorities - live a precarious existence, although they may maintain their dissimilarity and cultural boundaries over many decades, even in complex urban societies. Experiencing your community as being culturally threatened obviously has to do with relationships to the "other" and the maintenance of boundaries towards the world outside the community. Directing attention towards cultural threats to the ethnic community highlights ethnicity as a relational construct, as well as Barth's original focus on the ethnic boundary, as the locus of the construction of ethnicity.

Now, in what way are minority groups threatened, and how does this influence cultural strategies? Some very general observations concerning minorities may be worth thinking about. They are based on my own fieldwork among immigrants from recent waves of migration to Scandinavia, but hopefully some of my points may also be relevant to minorities with a longer historical trajectory such as, for example, indigenous minorities.

1. Minorities are *surrounded by majority culture*, which may be experienced as dominating, difficult to understand, or both. Cultural visibility in concert arenas and in the media is controlled by powerful commercial organisations with little interest in stimulating minority musics. When majority becomes minority, as the case is for many migrants, the need to reflect upon, reconsider, and in many cases, defend notions of cultural belonging soon arises. Majority society challenges these notions by offering and promoting options that are not available in the homeland where there is no great threat to the common feeling of ethnic or national belonging. In the homeland, the cultivation of collective identity is generally taken care of by others: the school system, the media and public institutions. It is not an issue that needs to be questioned by the individual or pointed out to the surrounding society.

2. A number of minority groups suffer from more or less severe *discrimination*, ranging from explicit state discrimination to more subtle forms of systematic cultural exclusion. In many European countries various non-western minority groups are effectively barred from various types of cultural work, and their music culture is often overlooked in public arenas as well as in music education (Fock 1997). In historical times, the Sami of northern Scandinavia experienced the virtual banning of their music by various institutions of the majority society, and they may still be confronted by attitudes suppressing their cultural heritage, especially from certain religious sects.

3. A different aspect is the threat of *assimilation*. Especially for groups with little new recruitment and limited contact with cultural "roots", the possibilities offered by the majority society or internationalised culture may seem more attractive, particularly for the second generation. As a result of intermarriage and cultural interaction, many minority groups have a sense of losing their foothold in the traditions and customs they identify with. Although current European policies regarding minorities often encourage so-called multiculturalism, there is minimal support directed towards those internal

community practices that enable disparate minority communities to survive as independent cultural entities.

4. A distinctive feature of many modern immigrant minorities is *an unbalanced demography*. Migrants come in waves; the onset or discontinuation of a wave of migration is due to economical and political events happening around the world. Young adults dominate most of these waves, either seeking better economic opportunities than they had in their country of origin or fleeing from persecution. Sometimes, as in the case of labour migrants, the minorities may also have an unbalanced gender profile. The early immigration of Pakistanis to Norway in the 1970s was dominated by young men, while the Chileans arriving in the late 1980s were often couples and young families. When a wave of migration eventually subsides there will be little "fresh" immigration, and large parts of the second generation may choose to engage in alternative cultural networks. Consequently, the time inevitably comes when minority communities of this kind experience the threat of cultural decline. A declining interest in major cultural symbols of ethnic belonging is undoubtedly a very real threat to the future of minority communities understood as coherent cultural entities, distinct from the surrounding society.

5. Minority communities often experience a *lack of cultural expertise*. In a population numbering only a few thousand or, as is the case for some refugee communities, only a few hundred, one cannot expect to find more than a handful of expert cultural performers. When for example in Norway we find only two or three west-African kora players, and only one good performer on the Chilean folk harp we obviously have a severe cultural isolation. There is a lack of cultural idols or superstars; there is no one to measure your level of performance against, and exchange musical material and ideas with. There is often limited organised training or cultural institutions promoting music and dance.

Choice and Strategies

Now what cultural strategies can we find that confront these challenges? Minority groups are, of course, not homogenous entities and the picture is varied and sometimes confusing. Still, a few general tendencies may be identified. As Max Peter Baumann (1995) has pointed out, the many cultural encounters of complex modern societies imply the availability of an endless variety of possible "solutions" depending on different patterns of acceptance, rejection, and cultural transformation. There are innumerable cultural alternatives available to everyone, including members of minority groups. Increasingly, ethnicity appears to be a matter of choice rather than a matter based on heritage or connections to place. For minorities, national and ethnic belonging becomes ever more subjective: a matter of negotiation dependent on choices and strategies made by the group, the family or the individual. There are many performers with minority backgrounds who, in the course of their careers, have come to a turning point and consciously chosen to emphasize and promote their ethnic belonging

through music. Examples among Sami musicians are Mari Boine and Per Niila Stålka, who both can refer to points in their life when they have chosen to promote certain elements of their heritage; to "wear" their ethnicity and present it in public music performance. Obviously, making of choices of this kind depends on the status and attractiveness of promoting your ethnic identity, which in return is linked to cultural policies and ways in which the culture in question is viewed and treated by the surrounding society.

One observation which is reflected in several works on musical minorities, and especially in works on diasporic communities, is the tendency to maintain - we may very well say resurrect or reconstruct - musical practices of central symbolic importance to the group (Knudsen 2001; Ronström 1992; Schierup and Ålund 1986; Sugarman 1997). We are talking about practices that link the group to notions of a common homeland or territory and a common past. It seems that in every minority group there tends to appear some group of people who take the task on their shoulders of carrying the banner of ethnicity, so to speak. These are people who take the responsibility of stimulating and cultivating ethnicity through music, and struggle to transfer feelings of ethnic belonging to the next generation. In most cases this is done through, what we very roughly may call, traditional musical practices. However, the existence of these flag-bearers of ethnicity does not necessarily mean that entire minority communities are any more invested in traditional culture than comparable groups in their countries of origin.

A common and significant cultural strategy is the building of independent, alternative cultural networks. Minorities build and develop their own cultural arenas and channels of communication and media: cultural associations, radio stations, sports clubs and not least, internet pages which also serve as cultural connections bridging the distance to a homeland or other communities sharing their ethnic identity. Immigrant communities all over the world have an astonishing presence on the Internet, to the extent that they, as I have seen in the case of the Chilean diaspora, may pretty much dominate the cultural discourse on a certain music style of particular significance.

For minority communities in the kind of the precarious situations I am referring to here, the most important aspect of their cultural efforts is basically keeping it up in order to hold the community together. It is of course not surprising that a lack of contact often generates a wish to preserve what is left. We may observe culturally conservative tendencies due to what may be called a lack of continuity with time. The primary cultural reference is "the homeland as one remembers it". The conception of "homeland culture" is based on memories from many years back in time, resulting in the preservation of performance practices, which in many cases are regarded as out of style or antiquated in the homeland. However, the development of modern communication technology and extensive travel facilitate international contact, and in many cases, counteracts this tendency.

In the absence of direct contact with authentic sources, there are tendencies towards a more pragmatic approach to cultural practices. This goes for the composition of musical groups' arrangements, folk costumes etc. We may also experience a widening of the experience of ethnicity. Whereas local distinctions in musical style may serve as ethnic boundaries in the homeland, the minority communities cannot afford to pay attention to such details, resulting in a sense of ethnicity related to wider, regional or national belonging. Thus, notions of authenticity as well as related notions of ethnic belonging may become less restrictive and exclusive.

On the other hand, cultural pragmatism gives room for creativity and inventiveness. In the diaspora, the control and patrolling of cultural boundaries is weakened, resulting in better opportunities for cross-cultural contact. Consequently, it is easier for an Argentine bandoneon player living in Paris to engage in musical fusions and experiments than one living in Buenos Aires, who easily might be subjected to the criticism and reprimands of the so-called tango police (Knudsen 2005). Cultural pragmatism, fusions, and crossovers are - at least in Scandinavia - also encouraged politically by the authorities, who tend to regard cross-cultural musical encounters as images of understanding and brotherhood, transgressing ethnic boundaries. Such policies may lead to some exciting musical encounters at festivals and concerts as well as some "forced marriages".

Community Based on Ethnicity: Chilean Immigrants

To illustrate some of the cultural strategies addressing the minority experience, I will first focus on a community of Chilean immigrants in the Oslo area. The group of people I have been studying[1] is based at Casa Cultural Chilena, a cultural centre aimed at cultivating and preserving Chilean culture, especially *criollo* folk culture with the nationally emblematic *cueca* dance playing an important part. Members are chiefly immigrants who came to Norway during the last two few years of the Pinochet dictatorship, between 1987 and 1990. They are a closely-knit community with a few families managing cultural activities. Their understanding of group belonging is closely connected to a focus on a common national background.

In this social environment, there is a strong tendency to encourage the cultivation of national symbols, such as the flag, national costumes, food and music. The names of performing groups, such as Tierra Chilena, Canta Chile and Chile Andino, reflect this emphasis. The Chilean cueca dancers and musicians in the diaspora express a deep commitment to carrying on a folk tradition, which they feel, links them to their roots. This need is evidently

[1] Research project on Chilean music culture in Norway 1998 - 2004. See Knudsen, Jan Sverre. 2001. "Dancing *cueca* "with your coat on": the role of traditional Chilean dance in an immigrant community". *British journal of ethnomusicology* 10, no. ii: 61-83, Knudsen, Jan Sverre. 2004. *Those that fly without wings - Music and dance in a Chilean immigrant community*. Acta humaniora no. 194. Oslo: Faculty of Arts University of Oslo : Unipub.

strengthened by their experience of the minority situation. Many of them had little contact with folk dancing before leaving Chile but felt an urgent need to get involved in this music some time after migrating. It is therefore tempting to call this practice a resurrection and a reinvention rather than a continuation. Performing cueca provides for many of them a new and vital link to their "homeland" and their past.

fig 1. Chilean cueca-dancers in Oslo

Although cueca music and dance, particularly in the rare performances aimed at external audiences, must obviously be considered as an emblem of the Chilean community, the performers are rarely concerned about considering the dance's possible use in showcasing the community. Its emblematic role is generally presented as secondary; the primary focus is directed towards the role of this music in the internal cultural and social development of the Chilean community, the catalytic functions.

In this cultural community, notions of authenticity are linked to images of how the music is remembered from the past in Chile. Musicians and dancers alike favour the Chilean folklore canon as they remember it from the Chile they left 15 to 20 years ago. There is little musical creativity among them, in the sense that no new musical material is being created. The transmission of culture to the next generation is of paramount importance. Obviously, the cultural survival of a community of this kind is completely dependent upon the next

generation being capable of taking over the enthusiasm for ethnically emblematic music.

Consequently, there is a strong focus on heritage and ethnic background. The musical practice of these groups is essentially exclusive. Participation is closely connected to notions of ethnicity, thus contributing to the building and maintenance of boundaries towards groups one could expect them to have a social interaction with, such as other Latino nationals.

Community Based on Hybridity: a Hip-Hop Collective

The cultural strategies of minorities do not always involve the cultivation of traditional music or other musics relating to their connection to places far away and times gone by. The minority experience may also incite strategies of different kinds, which are not necessarily linked to ethnicity. In complex modern societies, other cultural interfaces surface and become meaningful. Some minority groups may choose to engage in more trans-national cultural expressions, or develop local allegiances and innovative cultural practices that challenge or cross ethnic boundaries; in some cases forming completely new cultural and social constellations.

To illustrate such alternative ways of coping with, and articulating the minority experience, I will turn to a young, ethnically diverse hip-hop group in the centre of Oslo: *Minoritet1*. This pan-ethnic music collective consists of around 15 young immigrants from Iraq, Morocco, Somalia, Bosnia, Pakistan, Lithuania, Uganda, and Kurdistan. Their common minority experience is the basis of their community and their musical practice. Minoritet1 is perhaps not exactly what ethnomusicologists would call a minority group, although they explicitly declare that they are. Firstly, through their name, which simply means “the minority”, and secondly, through a strong focus on a kind of generic minority identity expressed through their lyrics and stage appearances.

fig. 2. Members of Minoritet1

Their musical community is characterised by the following traits. The group's way of making hip-hop music is fundamentally hybrid. Semi-fabricated music material in the form of "beats" are downloaded from the Internet, sometimes mixed with music samples from their country of origin, and elaborated upon further in a tiny studio at a youth centre in inner Oslo.

The cultural symbols and expressions of Minoritet1 are markers of social belonging as well as social distancing. Minoritet1 are deeply involved in the creation of a new urban language**:** "kebab-Norwegian". Music is undoubtedly the primary arena for the development of this novel patois, which challenges linguistic norms by mixing Norwegian with expressions from various languages: Berber, Spanish, English, Kurdish, and Somali. Rapping and singing in a particular, novel language signals community as well as boundaries. To outsiders who have to struggle hard to understand what they are rapping about, this clearly marks that "we have something in common that we don't share with others." Dress codes carry signals of affinity to a certain internationalised youth culture while their social codes include the adaptation of greeting procedures common in many Arabic countries, such as lifting the right hand to the chest following a handshake.

Just like the Chilean dancers, musical authenticity is linked to a certain faithfulness to a musical style and performance mode. But in this case, it does not involve performing any fixed canon. On the contrary, among the hip-hopers, authenticity has to do with creativity and inventiveness. Expressive quality is about making your own lyrics dealing with everyday life on the streets, and performing them in a spontaneous way with rhythmic precision and dexterity. Minoritet1 is ethnically inclusive. Their collective basically consists of those who, at a certain time four or five years ago, were most active in creating hip-hop at a public youth centre in central Oslo. Their ethnic backgrounds, which roughly reflect the composition of the inhabitants of this area, are, according to my observations, of minor importance. Still, just like the Chilean folk dancers, there is clearly a lot of boundary-building going on, not least through the practice of music. The bottom line in the messages they promote is a distancing towards the majority culture, commercial music, the police and the authorities. Their lyrics claim that all minority citizens have much in common through their common experiences of racism and oppression from the majority society.

It could be argued that we could understand the cultural community of Minoritet1 as an "ethnicity in the making". Their musical collective, in many ways, functions as what commonly is understood as an ethnic group. They have a particular shared language, they relate to and defend a limited geographical territory, and they have rituals, codes, and musical practices that bind them together and constitute boundaries towards similar groups. They even refer to a common history as immigrants to Norway. Perhaps the only thing that discerns them from the customary understanding of an ethnic group is that they do not refer to family links and genealogy in the strictly biological sense.

Challenges

As these examples indicate, minority groups employ a wide range of approaches that address their social and cultural situation. Investigating this multiplicity of cultural strategies forcefully confronts us with issues dealing with cultural complexity as well as individual choice.

Now, to what extent are cases such as these of interest to ethnomusicology? On the one hand, are we perhaps tempted to dismiss the Chilean folklorists in the diaspora as uninteresting and unoriginal, as mere reflections of "the real thing", far removed from the areas where "real" folklore is cultivated and developed? And, on the other hand, are we tempted to overlook the particular creative practices of hip-hop-communities on grounds that they represent a commercialised style with a marginal connection to "ethnic" belonging?

The way I see it, both kinds of musical practice mentioned are worthy of our careful attention. They both constitute powerful social practices essential to community-building, cultural visibility, and empowerment of minorities. Investigating such disparate strategies is essential to understanding the social dynamics of modern music societies.

As suggested by Beverly Diamond in her Blacking Memorial Lecture on indigenous minorities at the ESEM 2006 conference (Diamond 2006), our complex and globalized reality makes it necessary to scrutinise and review ethnomusicological approaches and challenge some of the concepts we think with and work with. Her proposal to consider exchanging *identity studies* with *alliance studies* is both timely and thought provoking. It is not difficult to appreciate that a refocusing in this direction would constitute a better framework for thinking about indigenous modernity, as well as minority culture in general. It would certainly stimulate researchers to direct their attention more towards the actions and strategies of "first nation" peoples and other minorities than towards cultural characteristics and specificities.

Diamond's proposal voices a concern apparently shared by other academics engaged in issues regarding minorities and ethnicity. It seems to echo Fredrik Barth (2002), who a few years ago again made himself noticed by suggesting that the term culture in many ways had had its day; that it had become too restrictive; had been used and misused in ways that no longer made it a useful term to social science. His somewhat provocative suggestion is that we could consider replacing *culture* with the term *knowledge*. "Anthropology of knowledge" could provide us with a better tool for addressing comparatively, radically different contexts without getting too bogged down in specificities of what we usually term "cultural settings".

Along the same line, I would suggest that we challenge our use of the term ethnicity and consider some alternatives. In many cases it could perhaps be substituted by the term "belonging". Obviously a more general term, but a term which encompasses a great deal of what the academic world today labels

ethnicity, while at the same time covering other important categories such as class, place, race, and nationality. "Ethnicity" is full of various rather problematic connotations derived from its historical use, and arguably still leads us to focus on notions of a cultural core rather than on relations and alliances. Through its social construction, "ethnicity" has become heavily loaded with essentialisation and the construction of stereotypes. Nevertheless, for many minority groups, it is obviously a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we must acknowledge that through wise and strategic use, "ethnicity" has been part of many a struggle aimed at giving a name, a voice, and power to disempowered and marginalised minority groups. For the Sami, references to ethnicity have played a key role in struggles for land rights, social rights, and cultural visibility. The establishment of the Sami parliament and a vibrant cultural centre such as the Àjtte museum in Jokkmokk would be unthinkable without successful negotiations based on notions of "ethnic" heritage and culture. Still, on the other hand, we cannot underestimate the term's inherent classifying and boundary-building capacity, which often prevents us from noticing cultural variation and multiplicity.

As a scientific tool, "ethnicity" has been challenged and diluted. Today it is no longer reserved for the different "other" and has, in the process, consequently lost some of its defining power. Seeking an alternative focus in our work could liberate us from some of the rather problematic demarcations as to what is ethnic and what is not. A musicology of belonging would perhaps open our eyes and ears to new and exciting vistas of the complexity and dynamics of human musical practices. It could shed light upon the ways in which styles and performances are made significant to individuals belonging to both majority and minority, while also acknowledging that there are many individuals who experience their identity as fundamentally hybrid, and who cultivate alliances in a variety of social settings and styles at the same time. In essence, turning towards a musicology of belonging, we would probably be able to address more effectively all of the intricate ways in which music actually matters in a complex world.

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